

Repeated exposure to traumatic images may be harmful to health

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(Medical Xpress)—Repeated exposure to violent images from the terrorist attacks of September 11 and the Iraq War led to an increase in physical and psychological ailments in a nationally representative sample of U.S. adults, according to a new UC Irvine study.

The study sheds light on the lingering effects of "collective [traumas](#)" such as [natural disasters](#), mass shootings and [terrorist attacks](#). A steady diet of graphic media images may have long-lasting mental and physical [health consequences](#), says study author Roxane Cohen Silver, UCI professor of [psychology](#) & social behavior, medicine and public health.

"I would not advocate restricting nor censoring war images for the psychological well-being of the public," Silver said. "Instead, I think it's important for people to be aware that there is no psychological benefit to repeated exposure to graphic images of horror."

People who watched more than four hours a day of 9/11 and Iraq War-related television coverage (in the weeks after the attacks and at the start of the war) reported both acute and post-traumatic stress symptoms over time. Those who watched more than four hours a day of 9/11-related coverage in the weeks after the attacks reported physician-diagnosed physical health [ailments](#) two to three years later.

Seeing two particular kinds of images in the early days of the Iraq War was associated with post-traumatic stress symptoms over time: soldiers engaged in battle and dead U.S. and Allied soldiers.

The study included assessments of participants' mental and [physical health](#) before the 9/11 attacks and information about their media exposure and acute stress responses immediately after the attacks and after the initiation of the Iraq War. Researchers conducted follow up assessments in the three years after 9/11.

The acute stress period refers to the first few weeks after the event and post-traumatic stress is any time after one month. Researchers started to measure stress nine to 14 days after 9/11 and within a few days after the start of the Iraq War.

Almost 12 percent of the 1,322 participants reported high levels of acute stress related to 9/11 and about 7 percent reported high levels of acute stress related to the Iraq War. After taking pre-9/11 mental health, demographic characteristics, and lifetime trauma exposure into account, people who watched four or more hours of 9/11-or [Iraq War](#)-related television were more likely to experience symptoms of acute stress.

"The results suggest that exposure to graphic [media images](#) may be an important mechanism through which the impact of collective trauma is dispersed widely," Silver says. "Our findings are both relevant and timely as vivid images reach larger audiences than ever before through YouTube, social media and smartphones."

Funded by the National Science Foundation, the study appears in a forthcoming issue of *Psychological Science*, the flag-ship journal of the Association for Psychological Science. It was co-authored by Alison Holman, assistant professor of nursing at UCI, Judith Pizarro Andersen of the University of Toronto, Mississauga, Michael Poulin of the University at Buffalo, Daniel McIntosh of the University of Denver and Virginia Gil-Rivas of the University of North Carolina, Charlotte.

"When we consider that graphic images of individuals being overcome

by the 2011 tsunami in Japan were shown repeatedly, that a vigorous debate occurred last year regarding the release of the gruesome death photos of Osama bin Laden, and that vivid and disturbing images of 9/11 will likely appear on our television screens marking the anniversary of the attacks, we believe that our paper has something important to say regarding the impact of repeated exposure to graphic traumatic images," Silver said.

Provided by University of California, Irvine

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